

Stormwater Management: Protection Comes with a Cost

A column by Councilmember Isiah Leggett

Monitoring stormwater management is an essential, though often unrecognized, responsibility of County Government. When we talk about stormwater management, we mean some crucial water quality or supply function such as water storage, sediment removal, aquatic habitat preservation in County streams, and flood control. These facilities are absolutely critical to preserving and improving water quality and protecting our environment.

Comparatively, Montgomery County does a reasonably good job in stormwater management. However, there are stormwater management facilities throughout the County that deserve special attention. Some are under the control of County Government, but many are privately owned and managed.

Many of the stormwater management facilities that are privately owned, i.e., ponds in homeowners' associations or in industrial parks, are old or were built to less than adequate standards. Far too many of them are in a state of disrepair, and very few are regularly serviced. The County has considered several proposals to upgrade these facilities. Unfortunately, all of these solutions would lead to very large repair bills and place the economic burden disproportionately on our County taxpayers. We have struggled with the challenges of developing a comprehensive, equitable, and cost-effective system to ensure these important facilities, particularly those under private control, meet current standards and are regularly and properly monitored throughout the entire County.

Last year, the Council created the "Commission on the Future, 2000 and Beyond". The Commission's objective was to develop guidelines and make recommendations to the Council for use over the coming decades to enhance our approach to a variety of challenging issues.

As a result of their research, the Commission determined that "the highest single environmental priority must be improving water quality...Attention to management of stormwater runoff...must move to reflect this priority."

While many environmental issues are important, they are often not within the control of local governments. However, water management is a critical environmental measurement that can be managed and effectively regulated at the County level. It is incumbent upon us, as local legislators, to do whatever we can to improve stormwater management in the County.

In January 1999, County Executive Doug Duncan and I created the Stormwater Management Financing Work Group tasked with assessing our current system and finding ways to finance future stormwater management improvements and activities. The Group represented a broad spectrum of interests, including environmental, development, taxpayers, homeowner associations, and government representatives.

The Work Group made two definitive recommendations -- 1) The broad public benefit that results from the proper management of stormwater and storm drain facilities suggests the need for Government to assume control of the entire system, and 2) We need a consistent source of revenue to sustain a program of inspections and maintenance of all stormwater management and storm drain facilities in the County as part of a comprehensive system, and preferably, funding should come from a user fee.

Before the County Council decides on any permanent action, I believe our County residents must understand the seriousness of the problem. This understanding is critical to acceptance of whatever plan is enacted.

There are many issues to consider.

First, those attractive stormwater ponds in your neighborhood may be failing, and currently it is your homeowners' association's responsibility to pay for repairs. If it does fail, it could mean the imposition of high, unanticipated assessments on the residents in that community.

Secondly, there are countless streams needing riprapping or culvert repair to prevent erosion. The County's general fund can not afford to do all this work without additional funds, but we also can not allow the environment to be neglected or damaged.

Finally, in some cases repair bills may fall disproportionately on general taxpayers while, in others, private property owners are supporting facilities that benefit other users. In short, the current funding system is inadequate and unfairly distributed.

I believe no program can gain the necessary support unless the public recognizes how closely connected a comprehensive stormwater management program is to the environmental health of the County. The need is unquestionably critical. We should not waste valuable time. Montgomery County has wrestled with this problem far too long without an adequate solution, due to our unwillingness or timidity to adequately inform our citizens of the negative environmental consequences and the increased economic burden we will face in the future if we fail to act now.

Although an enhanced stormwater management program may be expensive today, if we fail to act soon, the cost will be more onerous in years to come, and we will have continuing environmental damage if our facilities are not properly repaired now.

I therefore believe that a comprehensive adequately financed and equitable plan funded by a three to four-year phased-in user fee is the right direction. We should all recognize the untold benefits such an initiative would bring to the County's stormwater management program and to our fragile environment. This approach deserves careful consideration and, I hope, eventual approval.

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